

Case Study: Arousal for Triathletes

A comparison with elite triathlete mental preparation and that for elite touch players.

Morning Ritual Procedures

Research has shown that how you feel when you awake in the morning markedly affects your perceptions and mood, and influences that day's events. When waking on the morning of race day the athlete needs to insure that their initial perceptions are positive, enjoyable, and not rushed. A negative attitude must not be allowed to enter the mind on race morning. Below are a few ways you can ensure that you wake up on race day correctly.

Go slow. No loud alarms or sudden movement in posture and activity levels. Ease your body into the first waking moments. Lie in bed and slowly stretch, wiggle, and move yourself to sensations that will help you build and maintain positive sensations. Immediately remember, this is your time. The first thoughts you recognize in a day are also important for setting the days tone. Begin by telling yourself things like, "I feel great," "It's going to be my day," "My sleep restored my power," and "Now I am ready to perform to my full potential as a triathlete!"

Stretch and move ever so slowly. While you are still in bed, perform a slow gentle stretching routine that includes as many muscles as possible. Start at your feet and work your way up to your ears by contracting, stretching, and wiggling the muscles and joints. The intensity of these activities should be at a level that produces pleasurable feelings, not pain or cramping. I would recommend that you stretch as if you are in a slow motion replay.

Smile and be your own "Hero!" The simple act of smiling will create good feelings. You don't have to have a huge grin, an internal smile will work just fine. Whether the world knows you as a great triathlete is not as important as the fact that you know you are. So, be your own hero and smile because you are about to put it all on the line with the race of your life.

Write it down

In the beginning make a list of exactly what you will do on race morning in detail and make it specific to each ITU race course/situation. Routines need to be built and practiced until they're automatic, almost feeling guilty if you miss getting in the routine. Practicing and deliberately developing a positive attitude can be learned in five to eight days. Placing note and visual written cues beside your bed can remind and reinforce you to practice your new race day waking procedure. I want to emphasize that these rituals and routines must be followed for many mornings prior to the triathletes race week. These techniques could very possibly be practice for years before the benefits are maximized to their fullest potential. The coach and athlete need to begin and plan for this type of training early in the athlete's career.

Race Day Routine

The critical period of time between waking up and standing at the starting line should be devoted to activities that prepare the body and mind for your race. If you develop routines and rituals then the unexpected events that impact your psychological state will be almost automatically controlled, minimizing unwanted stress and distractions.

Pre- race nutrition

Prior to race day, both at home and away, plan in advance what and where you want to eat. If you will be eating away from home, make sure you have the foods you want to eat available on race morning. Pre-package your favorite morning foods. It's much better to take a few comfort foods with you than look for them prior to the days before the race especially if the athlete is in a foreign

land. Bring all the necessary gels and powders that you will use on race day and race morning. Have a nutrition plan that has already been tested. Have no intestinal surprises or upsets.. Experiment with routine and nutritional changes during training weeks and recovery weeks to be positive about how your systems react to the changes. The elite triathlete would be well advised to seek the advice of a Registered Dietician or an endurance nutritionist that's experienced in the real world bioenergetics needs, foods, and supplements of high performance athletes.

Waking the body

Athletes need to design and follow a warm up routine that prepares the body slowly and without any surprises. I have followed the same basic morning warm up routine for 20 years. This confidently prepares me physically for the days activities. You could classify it as a pre-pre-race warm-up. An example may be to complete a few easy knee bends, crunches, arm swings, and body twists that are enjoyable and send wake up signals to the cardiovascular and musculoskeletal system putting them in a gentle state of arousal. Have a routine, stick to the plan, and keep the activities non-stressful before the race. Avoid any hurry or sense of urgency of the situation so you are not rushing to the race site or scrambling to take care of final details. No matter what you do, remain focused on the race. The triathlete on race morning should feel the waking routine feeding the body with energy.

Equipment preparation and list

You should meticulously attend to your equipment before leaving for the race site. This serves as a way of focusing your attention on the importance of the race and also limits frustrating surprises. Always take the responsibility for your equipment needs. Don't count on others to bring a bike pump, water bottles, tubes, or goggles. Pack extra elastic laces, running shoes and warm clothes. A few other items that can help are superglue, tape, rubber bands, and Ziploc bags. Prepare an equipment list specifically for you and use it. Never assume that you remember all that you should be packing. I would recommend that you are obsessive about your equipment preparation and compulsive with using a checklist for your equipment.

A piece of equipment that is often overlooked is the race uniform. The ITU uniform regulations are posted on the ITU website and the athlete must know and follow all the guidelines. I have witnessed the inability of athlete to properly have their uniforms sized, properly marked, and in their possession prior to World Championship events. Every ITU competitor and coach needs to make this seemingly simple task a priority by adding this to their pre-race routine list.

Travel troubles

Travel will always be stressful when you are away from the normal training home routines and rituals. The best tactics will be to plan, check, re-check, and be as organized as possible. Expect and allow adequate time for unforeseen delays. Think about an alternate route or different modes of transportation in case of road closures, car, bus, or plane trouble. That way, if there is a problem you will have reduced the stress of finding another way to get to the race. At many World Championship, World Cup, and Continental Cup races the roads that were open prior to race day will be closed race morning. Expect longer or different routes to the race site race morning.

Performance-enhancing images

Visualization techniques keep the primary purpose of the day focused in your mind. This very powerful tool is painfully neglected. Using performance images and visualization techniques is done by many of the best athletes in the world in a variety of sports, but the elite triathlon community lags behind in this performance activity.

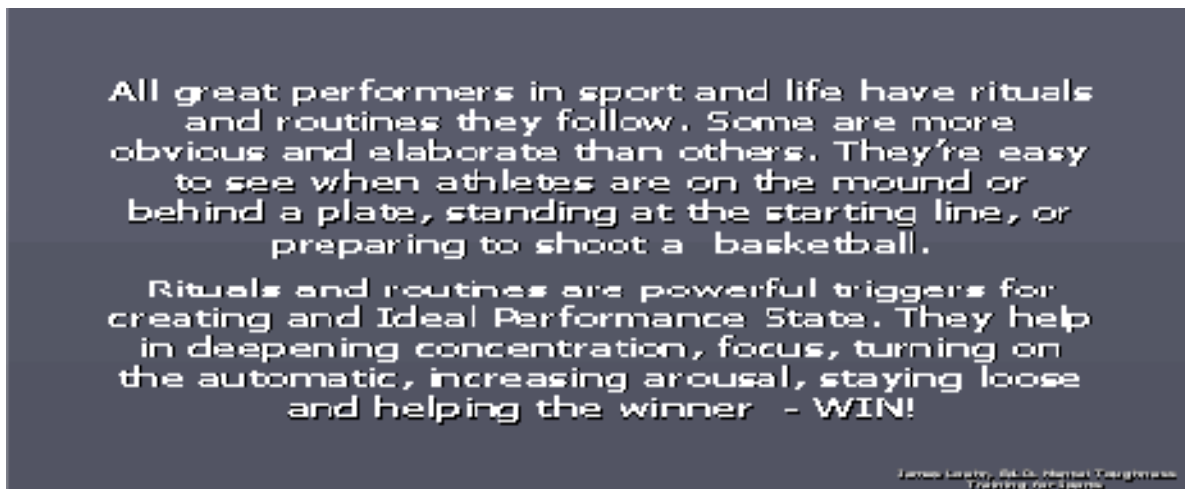
The elite triathletes should use visualization that pictures them performing and feeling as they would like to, beginning first thing as soon as the mind awakes in the morning and continuing

through the finish line. The imagery should be as specific as possible, Mimicking things like foot plant, arm carriage, relaxing at the first sign of tenseness.

In a 2004 Tour de France interview, Lance Armstrong said, "I know every bump and shadow on the Tour Time Trial courses. I've ridden them over and over before the race. I see myself performing on the slopes!" Libby Burrell and Gale Bernhardt video taped the Athens course and the USOC made copies for the athletes to use in training and to visually familiarize themselves with the 2004 Olympic race course. The more specific the visualization the more effective it will be. The elite triathlete should practice performance enhancing visualization techniques during training sessions to help develop effective routines and rituals early in their competitive career.

- Use performance-enhancement visualization to rehearse specific sections of the race and affirm positive outcomes.
- Describe to yourself mentally and verbally what will be done in "what if" situations that may occur during the race.
- Avoid "hanging out" with other competitors. Stay in your space and keep your energy.
- Assume nothing, check equipment and mentally stay focused.

All great performers in sport and life have rituals and routines they follow. Some are more obvious and elaborate than others. They're easy to see when athletes are on the mound or behind a plate, standing at the starting line, or preparing to shoot a basketball. Rituals and routines are powerful triggers for creating and Ideal Performance State. They help in deepening concentration, focus, turning on the automatic, increasing arousal, staying loose and helping the winner - WIN!



Race Site Planning

Plan everything at the race site and have a purpose for all that you do. There needs to be no wasted energy on race day. Race performances can be affected dramatically by seemingly insignificant events at the race site. Your initial activities after arriving at the race venue will set the stage for the activities that follow. Quickly learn where the registration, restrooms, entrances and exits are. Landmark your bike position and notice any last minute transition area changes that might have been made. By deliberately undertaking certain activities and not allowing distractions to take your focus away you'll set the pattern for an effective race routine and strategy at the race site.

H. A. Dorfman sums up why you build a routine in his 2003 book, *Coaching the Mental Game*. Dorfman writes, "Routines –set behavior – a plan. Call it what you will, effective preparation is grounded in such behavior."

Initial Mental Activity

Devise a constant reference point, regardless of where you are in the race, to bring you back into the moment. That could be words like, “faster,” “focus,” or “push” or a specific movement like breathing or relaxing a certain body part like your face or shoulders. Whatever you choose develop one ritual that can bring you back to the moment. This will help in achieving control over your race and unexpected issues. That reference movement or word will give you a certain amount of control over the remainder of your planned activities before the gun goes off. Find a routine and ritual you like and stick with it every time you race and in key training sessions.

Performing enhancement imagery when you first arrive near the starting line also sharpens your attention to that particular race. The scope of this enhancement imagery should encompass the whole race. Think about how you will start. Attack certain portions of the race course during the bike and run finish. As start time approaches, begin to narrow your focus on just the swim. Your thoughts need to become a vortex and the closer to the start the more focused you will be on your internal mental tactics and physiological swim skills and tactics. A triathlon swim start can be like a water war with elbows, feet, and fingers flying in an enormous water blender. Focusing and remaining internally calm will be paramount to a good swim.

Mannie Edelstein in her program, *Ten Steps to Breaking Mental Barriers* list these ten important steps for athletes to follow:

1. Think Positively – “Thoughts precede action – actions are determined by thought!”
2. Be Aware of Self-Talk – “What kind of results will you get if you are continually running yourself down? Be aware of negative self talk and control it.”
3. Make the Decision to Change – Matt Biondi said to himself right before his Gold medal swim, “I had a clear choice to make: to swing to the positive or the negative.” Something inside me said, “Put this behind you, and I decided I wasn’t going to let it bother me.” Matt made the decision!
4. Use Positive Self-Talk – Feed yourself positive self-talk. “Every day in every way, I’m getting better and better. Or Things always work out well for me!”
5. Understand Worry – Worry is always about something that has not happened yet. Why not spend that time planning and positively thinking to make it work? Worry turns into fear and fear can galvanize our actions in a race situation.
6. Focus on What You Want to Happen – A very interesting fact about worry is that when we worry, we are focusing on what we don’t want to happen. We actually concentrate and spend an enormous amount of time, energy, emotion and effort on something that we don’t want to happen. Triathletes need to realize that they can acquire the skills needed to focus and build routines and rituals on what they want to have happen but it does take time and practice.
7. Understand Your Self Image – Mark Allen said, “There are plenty of guys out there that should beat me, so much of it is their perception of their ability. They sell themselves short.” Self- image regulates our performance. What we believe becomes reality. It is based not on what we are capable of doing but on what we believe we are capable of doing.
8. Turn Weaknesses Into Strengths. “When I was younger my weaknesses were what I thought about, what went through my mind,” Allen said. “In triathlons, I don’t have these doubts. I can stand on the starting line and know that I have just as much chance as anyone else of having a great race day!”
9. Improve Self-Esteem – Enjoy being you – you’re unique. And besides you’re the only one you’ve got. “Remember, what the mind can conceive and believe, it can achieve,” Joan Benoit-Samuelson said: “I think whatever the mind wants the mind will get. It’s a question of what the mind can endure and who is at the instrument panel of the mind. You tell your mind what to do and if you’re able to fuel your mind with positive thoughts and self confidence, you’ll achieve some amazing things!”
10. Build Self-Confidence – “There always comes a point in any activity when you have to decide that you’re going to go forward and actually do it or pull back and let things sort of happen the way they’ll happen,” Biondi said. “Unless you can see yourself getting to the

wall (finish line) first, then there's no way you're going to have the motivation and desire to put forth at the moment you need to." Build your self-confidence by routinely putting yourself on the line under pressure and practicing the self confidence skills and routines it takes to come through when it's all on the line!

Warm-Up

Your warm-up should be as close as possible to the race start. If it occurs too far from the race start, the benefits may dissipate before the swimmers enter the water. Unless the water is frigidly cold the ITU athlete needs to be thoroughly warmed up in the water before the start of the "waterwar!"

There are three major effects of a thorough warm-up. First, the core temperature of the body rises to the point where a light sweat develops. Second, the neuromuscular patterns of racing are practiced through some race-intensity specific activities like strokes or strides. Third, it is the first opportunity to focus on features of the physical and mental dimension of the race.

When triathlete plan their warm-up activities, they should plan to:

- Make the warm up feel good. It's your activity.
- Have the content, quality and intensity of the activities (swim) build up to those of the actual race.
- Make sure the warm-up is open-ended. It is not completed until you are ready.
- Always include the short run to the transition area as part of the warm up routine.
- Check the fit and fastening of the wetsuit and goggles.

When you complete your warm up, make sure you don't lose the effects. Wear layers of clothing over your suit that will preserve your elevated body temperature. Wearing a wetsuit accomplishes this to an extent, as is often the case in ITU Olympic distance races. Often wearing two swim caps during warm up is helpful. Maintain your fluid levels and begin to isolate yourself mentally from other racers and spectators. Continue to do strides or other event-specific activities between the end of your warm-up and the start of the race. Don't worry about expending energy that you might use during the race since staying ready is critical.

Stretching is a valuable activity that can be useful in all phases of race preparation. Stretches should involve all the muscles you'll use in the race. However, each exercise should have a purpose to achieve some feeling of warmth and suppleness.

As the race approaches, the content of your pre-race strategy should comprise events and actions over which you have total control. Don't rely on others' schedules or strategies during this time. By keeping active, warm and focusing on deliberate and practiced activities, you'll be developing an automatic state of mind free of stress, full of confidence and decreased physical tensions. Your warm-up signals that the race is eminent and that final preparations for racing have started.

Race Build-Up Routine

As you begin to line up for the swim, you should enter into a very narrow focused phase of pre-race preparations that serve to heighten your responses and readiness to perform. This is a physical and mental build-up that puts the final touches for the start of the race or "waterwar!"

Start by isolating yourself as much as possible from personal interactions and begin to concentrate on your race strategy and internal cues. Increase the intensity of your activities for short periods. Your arm/body movements, if possible should become faster but cover shorter distances. As the starting time nears, you should approach a state of constant motion in order to facilitate control over your physical arousal, which needs to be high if you are to channel your

energies and start well. Maintain a relative high heart rate, take a few deep breaths and you are ready for the first discipline to begin!

Always flood yourself in positive reinforcement and self-talk. If it's difficult to concentrate on mental self-talk because of pre-race commotion, trying silently saying your positive statements or if possible, speaking out loud requires more concentration than just thinking and may help you maintain focus.

After you have focused on the whole race during your initial activities at the race site, begin concentrating on only the start and early segments as the race draws nearer. Thinking about the latter portion of the race will lose its effectiveness as the start becomes imminent. Your last thoughts before the gun goes off should be about how well you are going to start and your spatial awareness.

Pre-Race Psychological Strategies and Preparation

For every preferred action to be performed prior to a race, you should plan an alternative fall back action that achieves the same intended outcome. This develops a coping capacity that will help you to maintain a positive focus when things start to feel like they are falling apart. A failure to cope reduces performance capacity and available energy to the triathlete as indicated by neurobiologist Lawrence Katz in a 2004 article called "Brains World." Katz states that, "The brain uses an enormous amount of the body's energy; even under normal circumstances it uses about 20 percent of your body's entire energy production." You could compare the stress and energy demands of racing to power lifting for the brain. Imagine if the elite triathlete is so well prepared for the physical and mental stress of racing from building automatic responses through routine building in training that they had an extra 10 percent of their energy reserves available to them the last mile of the 10 kilometer run?!

"Mental toughness is Learned Not Inherited!"
James Loher, Ed.D. Mental Toughness Training for Sports

"Through Consistency and habits built from day to day routines!"

▶ Self motivated and self directed.	▶ Mentally alert and focused.
▶ Positive but realistic.	▶ Doggedly self confident.
▶ In control of their emotions.	▶ Fully responsible.
▶ Calm and relaxed under fire.	▶ Ready for action.
	▶ Determined

Routine and Ritual Success Strategies

Below are twenty practical items you may use as a menu for designing your own performance strategies.

1. Design and use a "big picture" game plan.

2. Make back-up and emergency contingency plans or “what ifs.”
3. Have a tested nutrition plan.
4. Check and re-check all the equipment you will use.
5. Formulate a routine for you specifically.
6. Visualize your success in each event.
7. Warm-up everything you will use in your performance.
8. Seek a coach or mentor who will listen to you.
9. Wear clothes that make you feel confident.
10. Plan quiet time for yourself.
11. Check out the venue where you will perform.
12. Use positive self-talk and positive imagery.
13. Watch your best performances on video tape.
14. Be around people who don't rain on your parade.
15. Be around people who are role models of mental toughness.
16. Know your opening tactics cold so they are automatic.
17. Read and review your past successes.
18. Maintain a consistent, organized schedule so there is no last-minute rushing.
19. Seek supporting individuals to reduce pressure on yourself.
20. Remain flexible and confident in your training and ability.

These pre-race routines, rituals, and strategies can be learned by devoting training time to the total practice of at least the race-site activities. Mimicking your pre-race warm-up before your next key workout is a great way to become comfortable with your routine. After each race, you can alter your strategy as new elements are included and others discarded. In time, precision and competence in developing your own ideal race-readiness state will improve. After all, you can never be too detailed in your pre-race strategy.

Lastly, it's a good idea to take written strategies to races. If you find it difficult to concentrate on what you need to do, you can read them over.

Learning to develop and employ pre-race mental strategies is a lengthy learning process-much like the physical training processes you go through while preparing to race. Practicing your mental strategies during workouts and experiencing them time after time in races will help you hone and refine them, and show you that they are equally as important as any other preparation you undertake.

I've listed ten mental thoughts that an elite ITU elite triathlete could use.

“I will swim, run, and/or bike:

1. confidently, relaxed and in a controlled state of terror!
2. smoothly but with lightning speed!
3. with purpose and conviction – Second is the first loser today!
4. dancing up the hills (in the water) like a man on fire!
5. staying in the moment and focused during the competitive confusion!
6. focused on my internal signals and movements with pain being my best friend!
7. flowing with the inner strength that the hours and miles of training brings.
8. with furry because this race is my race to take!
9. like I'm possessed because I was born to be in this moment,
10. because I love this s*#!”

H. A. Dorfman summed it up nicely when he said: “Athletes who wish to be consistent must make a commitment. First, they should formulate goals, which will help them determine what aspects of their game-physical and mental-they need to work at. Then they should develop a program of routine, which will allow them to habituate behaviors, so that these behaviors will become ‘second nature’ to them. They then must have the mental discipline and stamina to follow these routines, regardless of how they may be feeling at the given moment or on a given day.

“An athlete’s preparation should come from a compilation of all the good and appropriate habits he or she has on and off the field. His or her eating, sleeping, and conditioning habits should come as a result of a plan put into action. If they are habits of neglect, they will be habits of failure. Sloppy thinking is not the characteristic of successful athletes (coaches). Preparedness developed through positive and determined thinking (routines) succeeds and endures!”

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